

LEAVING HOME

from *A Candle in the Dark* by Adèle Geras

Throughout history, there have been times when children have had to be separated for a while from their families.

In her novel, *A Candle in the Dark*, Adèle Geras writes about two children who had to leave their home in Germany, just before the Second World War. They travelled from Berlin, through Holland to England.

This is a map of their journey.

The journey of Clara and Maxi



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9th – 13th December 1938

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‘Clara...Clara are you asleep? May I come in?’

‘I’m not asleep,’ Clara said. ‘It’s difficult. I keep thinking about tomorrow.’

Lotte sat down at the foot of her daughter’s bed. Clara could see how tired she looked, even though the only light in the room came from the corridor.

‘It’s about tomorrow that I want to talk to you, Clara.’ Lotte sighed. ‘I wish your father were here. I wish he could see you and Maxi before you go.’

‘You understand,’ Lotte said, ‘why we are sending you to England, you and Maxi?’

‘Yes, Mama, of course I do.’

‘When your father comes home, he and I will make every effort to come to England as soon as possible. We will only be separated for a few months...maybe only a few weeks. I want you to remember that when you feel sad or homesick. We will think of you every minute, and we

would love you to be happy. It would make everything much easier for us if we knew you and Maxi were...all right.'

Clara said: 'Of course, we will be fine. I know how lucky we are. I even know how to speak a little English, and we know where we are going. Very few children are so fortunate. And you've prepared envelopes and I will write and tell you how lovely it is in England.'

'Good girl. You are my good, brave girl, and you will look after Maxi who doesn't really know what is happening... Try hard, very hard not to cry.' Lotte kissed her daughter and left the room. Clara heard her sighing as she closed the door, and knew that she was not supposed to. Her mother pretended so hard to be cheerful all the time for her sake, and for Maxi's. Clara felt tears sliding out of the corners of her eyes in spite of all her bright words.

'I'm not crying,' she whispered aloud. 'I'm not.' She sat up in bed and rubbed her face with a corner of the quilt. This time tomorrow, she thought, we will be on the train.

'Tell me about the train!' Maxi asked on the way to the station. 'I want to go on the train. Is it a big train? Will it go fast?' Maxi was excited. Clara was relieved that his chatter kept Mama busy. If she was answering all his questions, she wouldn't have time to think about saying good-bye.

'Look at the children, Mama!' Maxi cried when he saw the crowds on the platform. 'Are they coming on the train too?'

'Yes, darling,' said Mama. 'They are all going to England. That man over there, and that lady...they will be on the train as well, in case you need help. They are from the committee that looks after refugees.'

There was a cardboard label around the neck of each child. Some were already wailing, clinging to their mothers' coats. Clara saw that parents were crying too, their mouths open, their eyes red. She glanced at her own mother. Lotte stood quietly, smartly dressed in her best coat with the velvet collar and her red hat with the black veil. This is how she wants me to think of her, Clara realised. Looking beautiful, looking happy. It was hard to see Lotte's eyes properly in the dim light of the station, and under the veil. Were they glittery with tears?



'Are you all right, Mama?' Clara asked.

'I'm glad that you and Maxi have this chance to be away from here.' Policemen in black began to shout; children and parents surged toward the train.

'Let's get in!' Maxi shouted. 'Let's find a seat. We can wave to Mama from the window.'

'Go,' said Lotte. She kissed Maxi, who seemed hardly to notice. He scrambled on to the train as fast as he could. Then she turned to kiss Clara.

‘Be brave,’ she said, and her voice sounded strangely thick and muffled. ‘Look after Maxi. He will be sad later, when all the excitement of being on a train wears off. Write to me.’

Clara knew she couldn’t speak, not even one word. If I open my mouth, she thought, all the tears that are squashed together in the back of my throat will spill out, like a waterfall and drown my mother. Instead, she clung to Lotte, squeezing her hard, hard around the neck. Then, unable to look at her any more, wanting only to be gone, and for the saying good-bye to be over, Clara stumbled on to the train and went to look for Maxi.

‘Here, Clara, here I am,’ he called to her as she looked into the first compartment. ‘I’m right by the window.’

Clara nodded and went to sit beside her brother, whose nose was pressed flat against the glass. Other children pushed into the remaining seats.

Lotte and the other parents had been pushed back behind a barrier. Every hand that Clara could see was waving. There were thousands and thousands of them. Crying and sobbing coming from somewhere behind her. I wish the train would start, Clara thought. I wish it would go.

‘We’re moving,’ Maxi shouted. There was a hiss of steam and the train shuddered and began to pull out of the station. Clara made sure she was smiling as she waved good-bye. Lotte smiled back as though this were a happy day. Clara watched her mother’s figure growing smaller and smaller. She could still see the red hat when Lotte’s face had become too tiny to recognise. Of course, Clara thought, that is why she wore it.

I will not cry, she thought. I will be as brave as Mama. They had been on the train for only half an hour when Maxi turned to Clara and said: ‘I like this train, but I want to go home now. Can we go home now, Clara? I want to see Mama.’

When she thought about it afterwards, it seemed to Clara that the time she and Maxi spent on the train to Holland was like a dream, or an old-fashioned flickering film at the cinema where images followed one after another before you had time to make sense of them. All night long, she was halfway between sleeping and waking. Maxi had cried and cried, and she had comforted him with tales of all the wonderful things there would be in England.



Dawn came at last. Out of the window, Clara could see that the countryside looked flatter. Soon, soon, they would be out of Germany and safe in Holland.

Eventually, the train slid into the station, puffing blue-grey clouds of steam. Every child who could reach a window was leaning out of it, and smiling and shouting. The platform was crowded; everyone in Holland, it seemed to Clara, was there to welcome them. ‘Look!’ said Maxi. ‘There’s food, and people are having drinks.’

As they climbed down from the train, the children were given chocolate and lemonade and best of all, thick slices of soft, white bread. Clara and Maxi waited for theirs. A kind lady, wearing an apron over her coat, gave Maxi an extra bar of chocolate. She smiled at Clara and spoke in German: ‘He looks the same age as my grandson...and you, will you have some more lemonade?’



Clara nodded and thanked the lady. Maxi wanted to stay with her. He clung to her skirts. In the end, the Dutch lady herself persuaded him to follow Clara out of the station. They were almost the last to make their way down to the dock. Just as they were leaving, Clara felt a hand pulling at her sleeve.

‘Miss...little Miss...’

Clara turned. An old man stood at her elbow, holding a small rag doll. Clara saw immediately how pretty the doll was, and with what love she had been made. Only the voice of the old man speaking to her in German stopped her from crying. He said: ‘She is for you. This is a small gift for you. Please take.’

Clara held the doll close. ‘Thank you,’ she said. ‘Thank you...’ and then a member of the Committee came and took her by the hand, to hurry her and Maxi towards the ship.



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